

Montgomery Countryside Alliance 2014 Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate Name: marc elrich

City: takoma park

Office Sought: county council at-large

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If you were asked to describe the County's Agricultural Reserve to someone, what would you say?

The Ag Reserve is a gorgeous expanse of land that the County had the foresight to set aside for agriculture. The County made a decision that it was important to preserve this area before development was allowed to sprawl into it. The Reserve comprises more than 90,000 acre, it's farms employ more than 10,000 people and it contributes more than a quarter billion dollars to the local economy. Not only does it preserve farming, but it preserves green space that serves to both clean the air and filter the water. Created in 1980, it may be the most far-sighted decision any council has made because it recognized both the value of farming and the contribution the land makes to the environment. And it has become the model for other jurisdictions that recognize that development pressures will gobble up every last inch of green space, if they are allowed to.

What is your vision for the future of the County's Agricultural Reserve?

The AG Reserve will be a permanent part of the County landscape. I anticipate that farming will expand and become more diverse, and that the farms here will come to play a more expanded role in the local food chain. With the growing interest in local foods and organic foods, new markets will open up. I'm encouraged by the new dairy operation and the increased interest in wine production and I believe that Council decisions to allow more processing will give our farmers the ability to add value to their crops. I'm hopeful that these trends will increase the public's awareness of the economic value of the Reserve, along with encouraging greater attention from our economic development department.

What more should the County be providing in terms of legislation and/or services to realize that vision?

I think the zoning changes will be very important in terms of encouraging more investment and more diverse investment in the reserve, and that the acceptance of agricultural processing will increase the appeal to new prospective farmers and maintain the viability of farming. I have been active in encouraging grape growing and the creation of wineries because not only is it a highly valuable economic activity, but it also can boost agricultural tourism. I've supported efforts to bring agricultural services to Poolesville and I think there's great potential for it to emerge as a model 21st century market town. It's in the right location so possible serve as a center for food aggregator, for opening an incubator kitchen that would encourage businesses that would work directly with farmers to create

opportunities to process crops, as well other processing facilities. Our economic development people should play an active role in assessing opportunities and providing assistance.

What challenges exist to ensuring that your vision for the Reserve is realized?

There are a number of challenges. There will always be pressure to open up the reserve to development and we need to resist it. Farmers are going to need a stronger partnership to help maintain their viability, and our Economic Development efforts don't yet fully value the role of agriculture. There is some pressure to allow uses that consume a large foot print, but that aren't genuinely agricultural and that is important because once you allow uses that aren't truly farming farming, you open the door to even more non-farm uses.

So to me, the two greatest threats are the pressure for more intense non-agricultural uses and the need to encourage a breadth of farming activities that encourage people to want to farm. We need the same long view that inspired the County to create the reserve in the first place, to inform our future decisions on what activities we allow and how we can encourage the ones we want.

What role do the County's schools play in the support of our local food system and success of local agriculture?

The more County residents know about the AG Reserve, the greater the understanding of it's value. Schools can serve multiple purposes. They can educate children about the reserve, and agriculture in general and, through the children, parents can be made more aware of the Reserve. Schools can and should be consumers of local produce which would expand markets for farmers who grow fruits and vegetables. Educating children about farms can create interest in farming. If students connect with the land, they may add this to the options they consider when they begin to think about where they might want to work. As we have magnets for different subject areas, we could create a farming magnet that gives students a more in-depth education in agriculture.

Education is one reason that I support the concept behind the Brickyard Educational farm and believe it could an enormous asset to the County. It could provide active learning programs and assist creation of school gardens.

The County has undertaken a comprehensive zoning code re-write. What are your thoughts about the County's zoning code enforcement? Does that division have adequate resources and is it properly functioning?

I have not been happy with zoning code enforcement and it's a complaint we here frequently from residential communities. Our system is "complaint-based" but it seems that despite complaints, enforcement is lax. I'm not convinced its a resources issue. We found an unwillingness to enforce the law even when a judge supported the county. We found creative interpretations of the language of the law that result in a lack of clarity over whether or not a violation is occurring.

What seems like common-sense interpretations of the law, apparently are not so common-sense. In the zoning code rewrite I wanted to be extra careful about what activities we allowed in the reserve, lest someone come in and claim that the law isn't clear on their desired use. There was no disagreement about allowing farm activity, but Council Staff and the Planning Chair worried about how it might be interpreted for activities ancillary to the farm. Non-farm uses erode the reserve and don't encourage farming.

Do you support an additional Potomac bridge and highway in the Reserve or adjacent rural zones?

NO, never, not at all.

